

ON KINDILINI

(Continued from Page Fourteen.)

noon when we ran the boat up on a barren white shore and stumbled out, saying to each other, 'We must find water.'

'I'll pass over certain episodes of little moment and bring you to the hour, late that night, when we knew that there was no water on the island. We had searched it, scanned it inch by inch, knew its configuration perfectly, and were gathered in despair at the foot of the only eminence in its small area.

'The extreme breadth of the islet was a half-mile. In length it extended for about two miles, running almost directly north and south. In the middle of it, dividing it in two, rose a long, steep, sharp ridge of rock, rising precipitously from the white, barren sand for nearly the length of the island. This rock was very much like a wall, or a backbone. On either side of this ridge the sand was verdurous except for a small clump of bushes huddled at the foot of an abrupt cliff on the east face. These formed a thick, possibly a score of feet through, none of the bushes being over a dozen feet high. Above them the rock rose vertically for fifty feet, glaring white. I assure you that we knew what we were talking about when we agreed that there was no water. We had even dug in the coarse, white, sharp coral sand. We had tried to scale the spine of rock, and failed. We had almost pulled the stunted shrubs up in an effort to find whence they sucked their moisture. And now, lighted by the rising moon, we gaped at each other, mumbling our despair through swollen lips. Apart from us sat three people: Susan Hays, her hands clasped in her lap, and Honoria and Plicott, silently staring at us, driven from us by the consciousness that to them we owed our lamentable death.

'I don't know what would have been the outcome of our despair if a cloud had not suddenly overspread us and poured down a flood of rain. For an hour we drank out of our palms—out of any vessel we could find; we soaked our bodies in the warm water, lifting our faces to it in a sort of ecstasy. Yet, when dawn came we had managed to collect only a few gallons, and a cloudless sky and burning sun mocked us.

'We worked and built us a camp, with a fireplace, a cellar dug in the sand in the rock's shadow for our provisions, and a little store place for the scanty fuel the sailors gathered. Then Gridley divided us into watches, and we prepared to stay till we could accumulate enough water to fill the cask, which we repaired, and so continue our voyage to the mainland. Our circumstances were not pleasant: we were a thousand miles from land, the climate forbade us to expect many showers, and there was no hope of a passing vessel. Under these conditions, we settled down as best we might, relying on the possibility of soon being ready to take to the boat again.

'The seamen instantly accommodated themselves, and Gridley relapsed into sullen taciturnity. The old man, Howard, sat first on the west side of the rock of a morning, panting during the flaming noon, and then, when the sun had passed the meridian, crept over into the shadow on the westward side. With him, constantly silent, shy, thoughtful, went Susan Hays. Plicott and Honoria had withdrawn themselves to the edge of the thicket, where they sat, her hand in his, while he glared out into the great sunshine with stormy eyes. Honoria seemed pensive, with a subdued demeanor.

'Our water again gave out, in due course. We sought the implacable heavens for a cloud. Gridley tried to make a rude still to distill the sea water into a drinkable liquid; he failed. Once more we searched into the hot sand with our fingers. Plicott came with us, furious in the hunt for two days. Then he desisted, and lay in the shadow of the thicket, gazing seaward, or staring at Honoria, now sunburnt and with blackened lips and bloodshot eyes.

'The next night thereafter I awakened from an uneasy sleep, hearing a rustling sound in the thicket, outside which Howard, Susan Hays, Honoria, Plicott, and myself had laid us down. I was at the foot of the rock, and when I opened my eyes I thought I discovered a figure clambering painfully up the cliff, out of the tops of the bushes. At first I supposed I was dreaming; but I finally decided that some one was trying desperately to find water. There was nothing unusual in this, for each of us at some time or another wandered off in that hopeless quest. However, I had not thought it possible to scale the rock. I stole away and into the thicket. There I waited a slight, scrambling noise warned me that the man was coming down. I drew aside and listened. Whoever it was dropped softly upon the sand and sank down, breathing heavily. Waiting for the moon to rise and give me light upon him, I fell asleep. When I awakened again it was to hear the whisper of a man's husky voice. It was Plicott, saying, 'Drink it all, Honoria. I've found it for you.'

'Gradually I made out that they were standing a few feet from me, the woman with one hand supporting her against the rock. She was whispering, 'I mustn't, Harry. Give it to the others. It's wicked! Give it to the others!'

'The others shall have some when you're done,' he insisted. 'You are first.'

'And there is plenty?' she demanded.

'Plenty,' he told her.

'Presently she sighed, and drank. A moment later Plicott crawled past me, and then Honoria stepped out of the thicket. When I returned to the rest, I saw her seated a little distance off; Plicott was back in his old place. You see what I had discovered: Plicott had found water. While I was debating what to do, the dawn broke. Scanning the blackened, swollen faces about me, I kept silent. Instead of speaking a word of what I knew, I followed Henry down to the boat, and when he turned on me with a look of inquiry, I made no bones of my intentions. 'You've found water,' I said. 'Where is it?'

'He snarled at me like an animal.

'You'll never know,' he muttered.

'I will,' I said loudly. 'I suppose you think that you and the woman you have stolen can have it all. But it is on account of you and your guilt that we decent people are dying. Do you suppose we will endure it?'

'I can't describe the look that altered his face. He stood there, staring at me with a hurt, puzzled expression, a man suddenly confronted with an inexplicable problem. 'But you don't love her!' he managed to say.

'Of course I don't,' I retorted. 'Why should I? But I'm going to have some of that water.'

'You can give what explanation you like of his next move. He took me by the arm and strode back to the thicket, pulling me into its shade after him. On the ground lay Honoria, asleep. He motioned to me to pass her, and as I crept up beside him he laid his finger on a small groove in the face of the rock.

'Look!' he said.

'The depression, a very shallow one, extended vertically up. It was still damp. It was the channel of a stream.

'I found it,' he told me savagely.

'It's mine. Somewhere up the face of the cliff there is the outlet of a spring. When the sun shines and heats the rock, all the water that issues evaporates before it comes down within reach. But at night, after the face of the rock has cooled, it commences to trickle down into a little basin twenty feet up there. When that basin is filled a few drops trickle down to the ground, but then the sun rises and heats the rock and instantly evaporates it, so that a few minutes after sunrise there is only this slight dampness to mark its course. It's mine!'

'But if one should climb up to the spring—to that basin,' I said eagerly, 'then we could get water all day long, for all of us.'

'He laughed feverishly. 'I've measured it. Working for hours last night, I got—how much? A cupful! All told, less than a pint! Enough for only one!'

'And that's you!' I stormed.

'No,' he replied dully. 'Honoria.'

'I went away, quite undecided. I was of a mind to tell the rest. But what good would that do? The scanty pint a day—a cupful—would not moisten the lips of all of us. And, besides, I had a profound fear of Plicott. He was capable of murder; he would kill us all, if it came to the question. I did not doubt his ability. While we had silently made these two, the guilty man and the guilty woman, apart from us, separated by an invisible strong line, they dominated us. Keeping to themselves, forced aloof by some unspoken reprobation of ours, they, however, seemed to have the balance of power with them. Yet I cannot tell what I would have done had not an opportune shower drenched us and given us half a cask of water again. This reprieve strengthened us. But at the end of twenty-four hours we awakened to find that the three sailors had stolen the cask and our boat and vanished, leaving Howard and the mate, Plicott, Honoria, Susan, and myself with but very little victual and no water.

'Day after day passed. Our little rations of food would not go down our throats for dryness. We lay in the shadow of the rock, after soaking our bodies in the surf, and muttered insane blasphemy at the pitiless and shining sky. When I say 'we' and 'our' I refer to those of us who had thrust Plicott and Honoria into a separate society. I did not disclose their secret—yet. We were all weakened and nervous; Plicott and the woman were strong, unweakened by the heat and the drought. But I saw to it that they got nothing of our scanty food. I recall smiling across at Plicott and daring him to demand his rations. And he smiled back, magnificently.

'Gridley grew violent within two days after the desertion of the seamen, went off by himself, and maintained a steady and vigilant watch over us, like a vulture. Howard, old and dried up anyway, did not seem to need water as much as the rest of us. He sat against the rock, as he had always done, changing from shadow to shadow as the sun swept overhead; and Susan Hays leaned on his knee and dreamed, her hands clasped over her bosom. Apart, Honoria sat like a splendid goddess at the entrance of her sacred thicket; sunk in dark meditation, Plicott sat beyond her, sullen and silent, now staring at the woman, now gazing upon the ground.

'I think about two days more had passed when I was awakened in deep night to hear a harsh voice saying, 'Get back! Get back!' I got up and ran round the edge of the rock toward the thicket, and saw Gridley on one knee, fighting off Plicott.

'As I came up the second mate called out through the dark, 'They've got water! Kill them both!' He rolled over under a blow, his voice dying in his throat.

'The tumult brought Howard, and he and I stormed at Plicott, who confronted us under the bright stars, pistol in hand. I admit it was not a pretty scene. But Plicott's pistol subdued us, and we went muttering away. As we stumbled back, looking over our shoulders and cursing, the old man pitched forward. Gridley, stooping over him, stared into his set face and rose, croaking, 'He's dead.' So he was.

'This brought matters to a pass. The girl, Susan Hays, came and sat through the morning by the side of her only protector and friend, dry-eyed, serene, her cracked lips parted in a gentle smile. Far off, Gridley huddled in the wet sand at the water's edge, while Plicott stood on the other side, pistol in hand. After hours of hesitation, I got up and drew my knife, intending to go and kill Plicott.

'But at this moment Honoria came, walking easily and slowly, calling out, 'Susan! Susan!'

'Plicott made a sudden attempt to stop her. But she merely smiled at him and came on, splendid and beautiful, white arms swinging at her sides, her cheeks fresh and dewy. She saw the girl crouched over the old man's body, and halted. Then she ran up to her, crying, 'Susan! Susan! What's the matter?'

'The girl lifted her quiet, dull eyes and said simply, 'He's dead.'

'Honoria swept down beside her, drawing her into her arms. 'How did he die?' she cried. 'What's the matter?'

'I broke in: 'Can you ask! How dare you ask! Can't you see we are all dying for lack of the water you are using?'

'She stared at us; then, suddenly

stooping over, she brushed her white finger-tips across the old man's parted lips. His open eyes and protruding tongue would have told any one the story. And Honoria got up slowly, dreading, and walked away. Plicott met her and tried to say something. She shook her head. 'Why did you deceive me? I didn't know,' I heard her say. 'Why didn't you tell me that they had no water?' She stared at him a long moment, and then said, 'We are guilty, Harry. We can never get away from it.'

'She went into the covert of the thicket and came out with a cup in her hand. This she carried to Susan and held to her lips, with little murmurs of comfort. The girl, suddenly waking, so to speak, gulped the water down, looked wildly over the scene, and fell to sobbing bitterly. Honoria put her arms about her.

'I'll never see Tom,' I heard Susan whisper. 'He's waiting for me in Connecticut.'

'Yes, you'll see him yet,' Honoria returned, while Plicott and I stood by dumbly.

'No, and I've waited for him all my life—till he made money enough. And now I won't see him ever! Oh, Mrs. McLean, you've been married and had your life and the man you love! You've had your husband! And I'll never have Tom!'

'Imagine that slender, plangent voice talking to the brassy sky, through pale lips, over a dead body. It shook me. I seemed to see before me all the misery of the world suddenly drawn down into the heart of a young girl. To Honoria it carried a different message; she rose, with infinite gentleness, and caught Plicott's eye.

'I understand why you did this, Harry,' she said to him, shading her eyes with her hands. 'You didn't tell me the rest were dying for a drink of water. But you and I have come to the end of things, Harry. I ought never to have loved you. I'm a wicked woman. But now that it is all done, and you and I have nothing else, we'll keep our love. We'll deserve it, Harry. We'll earn the right to carry it to God and tell him it wasn't all false, it wasn't all unworthy and mean and dishonorable. Bring her in and put her in the shade.'

'Plicott stooped over dizzily, took Susan in his arms, and carried her into the thicket. Honoria went in then, and we stood outside, panting and thirsty and desperate. When Honoria came out she walked to Plicott and put her fingers in his. 'Now we'll die together,' she said calmly, and sat down.

'That night we buried the old man, and Gridley drew me aside to say, 'I know that Plicott and that woman stole our cask of water. Look at their wet lips! Let's kill them!' He made this proposal with earnestness; and when he had made it he lay down, struggled a little with phantoms, and later died in a burning pain.

'Without any help I dragged his body into the shadow of the rock, and went and told Honoria and Henry. She looked at me quietly. 'I'm guilty of his death, too,' she said. 'But I didn't know. You wouldn't stay with us; you looked at us as if we were too wicked, and we stayed by ourselves. I didn't know you were not having water to drink. Harry showed me how to get the water at night, and there was only enough for the two of us. Why shouldn't we have it?'

'But Plicott owed it to the rest of us,' I said brutally. 'He had no business to snatch you into our boat and get your husband to shoot at us and spoil our cask of water.'

'That is so,' she replied. 'But I'm glad Harry loved me that much. Now we'll let Susan have the water, so that she can meet that fellow in Connecticut.' She crept into Plicott's arms, and we sat together through the night. At dawn, gently disengaging himself, Plicott drew me aside to say through cracked lips, 'I didn't drink any of the water. She thought there was plenty.'

'But what became of it?' I demanded.

'There was only a cupful,' he answered, walking on beyond the thicket.

'But something caught my eye. Pinned against the hot face of the rock, I saw a pair of long stockings spread out to dry.

'To my exclamation he croaked: 'She washed them. She thought there was plenty of water. You couldn't expect her not to . . . a delicate woman. . . . The sea water, she said, made them sticky . . . she wanted to be beautiful for my sake. . . . She said she would have made me a tidy wife . . . men like tidiness . . . she washed them. I lied to her . . . she went thirsty herself, so's she could have her stockings clean . . . she . . . Honoria!'

'He suddenly fell forward, clutching his fingers into the sand, and sighed, blowing the coral dust out of his parched nostrils in a final puff. And, as he relaxed, a gentle draught of air picked one of the lace stockings from the rock and let it fall across his lifeless hand.

'It was a week later, or two or three weeks later (time passed by us with tremendous irregularity), that I dreamed that it rained. I started to my feet, and in my wild eagerness stumbled over something and fell, being at the end of my powers. There I lay, sucking at the very air for moisture till I slept again. I was roused at daylight to see Susan standing over me, sobbing. 'She's dead! she's dead!' she cried again and again.

'I remember that I looked up into the blue sky and felt my dry clothes about me. When I cleared my eyes, I saw, a few yards off, Honoria, lying on her back, her glowing hair shrouding her white face, her parched lips and shrunken throat. Beyond her I saw the white surf. Yet beyond that gleamed the sail of a vessel.

'I forgot everything, and ran down to the shore and shouted in a thin voice, while Susan stood before me, her hands clasped over her bosom in an agony of suspense. It wasn't till I was sure the schooner was heading up for the island that I turned round, and realized that Honoria was quite dead in the barren sand that covered the lean, burnt body of the man who had loved her lawlessly.'

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